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Sistah Vegans

The *Satya* Interview with Amie Breeze Harper



How can veganism resist institutional racism? What's the source of reproductive health ailments among African American women? What's being a black female vegan in this country? These are some of the questions Amie Breeze Harper, a graduate student at Harvard, was seeking answers when she sent out a call for submissions from black identified female vegans for her Sistah Vegan anthology project. The resulting book, *Sistah Vegans: Black Women, Food, Health, and Society*, will be published in 2007 and comprised of a collection of critical essays, narratives and poems from female vegans of the African Diaspora.

Harper is also looking at how black female vegans use cyberspace for health activism and create virtual communities of like-minded people. She started a Sistah Vegan Yahoo! discussion group where members discuss a wide variety of issues. Experienced Sistah Vegans mentor newbies on how to organize to get access to healthy foods in their communities and they trade secrets on which plant-based foods shrink uterine fibroids and ease menstrual discomfort. The women also discuss body type issues. What does it mean to be a full-sized Black female vegan in a culture that associates veganism with thinness and whiteness, or a thin Sistah Vegan in an African American community that embraces full figured women?

After returning from the annual YouthBuild USA Alumni Xchange Conference on Breaking Unhealthy Cycles, in Mobile, Alabama, **Amie Breeze Harper** spoke with **Sangamithra Iyengar** about connecting racism and speciesism to food and health.

Tell us about the Sistah Vegan Anthology and why you started this project.

In September 2005, I transitioned to veganism because it aligned with my perceptions of social environmental justice. I had been living in the Boston area for six years, and couldn't find any Black identified vegans. I was also doing research on the internet just to look at veganism and African Americans when I somehow came to the BlackPlanet.com website. There was a dialogue about PETA campaign and the images used—people suffering in the Holocaust, Native American genocide and African American slaves positioned next to nonhuman animals that were suffering from exploitation. There were 28 people on that dialogue and 27 were really annoyed and offended by the PETA campaign. There was only one Black woman who said she understood what PETA was trying to convey. I found that interesting and wondered if this was a case of racism from PETA or speciesism from the 27 Black people on the forum.

I decided to do a call for papers and see if there were other female vegans of the African Diaspora in America. I wanted to look at how our philosophies are shaped by the fact that most of us, collectively Black women, have experienced racism and classism. How does that shape how we understand nutrition, veganism and how we understand those connections to environmentalism and the treatment of nonhuman animals?

What was the response among Sistah Vegans to this PETA campaign?

I thought they would probably agree with PETA, but actually a lot of them did not. It's not that they disagreed with the intention or what PETA was trying to convey, but were actually very offended by the appropriation of the images.

But there were several women on the site arguing they didn't feel offended. They felt it wasn't an appropriation. They wanted to look deeper, understanding speciesism isn't good for anyone. Both sides had very good arguments.

What are some ways vegan and animal rights groups can be more effective in their outreach and incorporating larger justice issues?

In my experience, the majority of Sistah Vegans first approached veganism from a health perspective. They realized if they didn't, they would lose their breasts, their uterus or die from diabetes like many people in their families. For many of them the catalyst didn't come from being aware of animal rights, it was understanding that we are basically dying and had to combat and that.

Many of us first saw our health has been compromised because of racism and classism, and then started connecting that with the mistreatment of nonhuman animals. What nonhuman animals go through is almost the same as what black people historically have gone through in this country. Some people don't want to admit that, but many women on this project see those connections.

This is something mainstream animal groups that are largely white and middle class should take care of if they want to enter communities of color. They should make the health aspect links first.

My biggest concern is how white middle class animal activists—as people that benefit from white privilege and systemic whiteness—enter into communities of color with their arguments. What does it mean for them to enter the community and say, your experience as slaves is parallel to the experience that nonhuman animals currently endure? I struggle with that. I can see both sides and imagine most blacks would be offended. And then white animal advocates would be offended, blacks being offended. It's a hard area to dance around but I think we have to start addressing it.

How do we start?

What I learned is if you are part of a privileged group, whether it is race, class, sex, etc., you have to be careful not to appropriate, to understand the power dynamics behind what you are doing, and how it may potentially offend people you are “trying to enlighten.”

A lot of groups involved in social justice are not trained in what it means to be white and middle upper class. I think groups should understand this before they begin to think their concept of justice and liberation is “universal.” While many groups don't address systemic whiteness, they still benefit from it. I have to address it because it is wrong and I don't benefit from it.

If somehow people could see that it is all connected; that the movement in the black community for racial and class liberation is not disconnected from the environmental sustainability movement which is not disconnected from ending exploitation of animals. Think of all the toxic waste coming out of the agribusiness industry. Where does it end up? It doesn't end up in the backyard of Beverly Hills, but where there are working class people of color. If we dig to make those connections, we realize eating animals does affect me as a poor person of color. A lot of waste is going in my backyard and causing my community lots of health disparities and suffering.

Can you talk specifically about some of the health disparities related to food in the black community?

A lot of us have reproductive ailments. What also led me to practice veganism was that I was diagnosed with uterine fibroids, which apparently runs rampant in the black community. All the women in my family have had hysterectomies because of the fibroid situation. I read in *It's a Sister Thing: A Guide to Understanding and Dealing with Fibroids for Black Women*, that black women are three to nine times more likely to have fibroids than the general population. We also tend to get fibroids at a younger age than white women.

I'm hearing from black vegan women who don't want to become another statistic. They realize the standard American diet is killing us. The awareness is there, but a lot of black women who are v newbies feel alone. They understand the food they've been eating for the last 20 or 30 years is causing these problems. For many, they are the only vegans they know and don't know how to p proper vegan nutrition. A lot of them don't even have access to good food and when they do, it is targeted and located in middle to upper middle class neighborhoods which they don't live in or

How did you come to veganism as a means of addressing these health problem

I didn't want to go the route of hormonal therapy or surgery. I spoke with my dad and he asked v Africans did before slavery. What herbs were we using, what was our diet like? Then, a woman work introduced me to Queen Afua, an Afrikan holistic health healer. Reading her work, I learn about foods that contributed to my reproductive issues and my physical and emotional propler Queen Afua preaches taking all flesh foods out of your diet because they are high in estrogen, al with junk foods like refined white sugar and refined wheat flour. Her book *Sacred Women* talk about how our wombs are still suffering from the times of slavery. Our bodies had been used as breeders for hundreds of years, and our wombs are still trying to heal. It's a physical trauma, a psychic trauma.

Black women were used as wet nurses for slave masters' children. Their wombs were used to pr more slaves whether they wanted to or not. This is frighteningly similar to the suffering chicken cows go through. They are exploited to the point where we use their reproductive cycles to feed This scary parallel goes even deeper. As women continue eating these eggs and flesh products, high in hormones and other unhealthy substances, it makes estrogen levels in their bodies ever higher. Our reproductive systems suffer because of the exploitation of the reproductive systems chickens and cows.

Who else had a big influence on you?

Another influence that got me practicing veganism was reading about Dick Gregory in Doris Wi *Black Hunger* and seeing the connections he made to institutionalized racism dietary practice came across this quote that really made me think:

I personally would say that the quickest way to wipe out a group of people is to put them on a sot diet. One of the tragedies is that the very folks in the black community who are most sophisticat terms of the political realities in this country are nonetheless advocates of "soul food." They will down a heavy rap on genocide in America with regard to black folks, then walk into a soul food restaurant and help the genocide along.

Can you talk more about veganism as an approach to combating institutional racism, and the legacies of colonialism and slavery?

It is important to note a lot of the health disparities we face result from legacies of colonialism, s and current systemic whiteness.

A lot of the foods African Americans have been eating we were given as part of the slave system colonialism. Most of the food and preparation was never actually healthy—high flesh foods, hig saturated fat and sugar foods. A lot of it came from exploiting nonhuman animals and the reaso are eating it is because we ourselves historically have been exploited as slaves. We need to start reflecting deeper in our practices of anti-racism and decolonization. Like Dick Gregory notes, v even need to look at our own traditional black soul food diet as part of this decolonization proces

One thing I've been thinking about lately is the work of Antonia Dumas who works at the Food S Institute in New York. In 2001 she went to Florida to the Bay Point School for boys where she w with low-income "at risk" adjudicated black and Latino teens. She asked the boys to incorporat plant-based whole foods diet for six weeks and keep a food journal about how they feel. In the journals the boys recorded that their moods changed drastically. Their grades changed for the l and physically they felt better. It was amazing. I listened to an interview of her on the radio show Animal Voices, out of Toronto. The interviewer noticed Antonia was having problems getting fi for this project and asked 'Do you think this has something to do with how profitable the prison industrial complex is?' I thought that was an interesting link to what a more mindful and

compassionate diet means for at risk youth. Whole foods plant-based veganism is potentially a way to lower the risk of these teenage boys entering the prison industrial complex.

A few months ago, we were having a discussion about how the public dialogue around ethical eating is dominated by a select few, and how it often doesn't incorporate the larger justice issue we are talking about here. It seems to be more about modifying the status quo than challenging consumption. Can you talk about that?

I've been thinking about that since I read Peter Singer's interview in *Satya*. I understood his in that maybe if we get people mindful and aware of where their meat comes from, then they'll start buying organic and free-range. Maybe it's more "humane," maybe eventually this will spark something in the person's brain to really reflect on where their food comes from. I think he was hoping people will keep on enlightening themselves to the point where they'll realize they don't to eat meat.

But I think someone can actually fall into being apathetic and complacent. It just puts a band-aid on the larger problem. Back to African slavery, there were people trying to figure out how to make the state of slavery better, how to make the slaves' lives better. But that doesn't address the question of how to enslave human beings?

Supposedly by 2048 we will no longer have a seafood stock from the ocean. And people are saying 'oh no, well what fish can we start breeding so we can have more to eat?' My question is why are we not reframing the question to, why do we still need to eat fish?

At least there is some mindfulness and compassion behind fair trade coffee, chocolate and tea, so I don't want it to stop there. It is a phenomenal idea because up until recently many people were suffering to give first worlders their addictive substances. But then, I started thinking why are we using their land to give us our addictive substances—sugar, tea, coffee and chocolate—even if it's fairly traded? Why don't we reframe the question, and ask why can't we just let them use that land to grow their own crops to be self-sufficient?

It's problematic because we are not trying to get to the very root of the problem, which is, at least in the first world, overconsumption. We are not addressing our addictions.

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